

Islamic Sources: Quran and Sunnah

(part 1 of 2)



The ultimate manifestation of God’s grace for man, the ultimate wisdom, and the ultimate beauty of expression: in short, the word of God. This is how the German scholar, Muhammad Asad, once described the Quran. If one were to ask any Muslim to depict it, most likely they would offer similar words. The Quran, to the Muslim, is the irrefutable, inimitable Word of God. It was revealed by God Almighty through Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. The Prophet himself had no role in authoring the Quran, he was merely a Messenger, repeating the dictates of the Divine Creator:

“He (Muhammad) does not speak of his own desire. It is no less than an Inspiration sent down to him.” (Quran 53:3-4)

The Quran was revealed in Arabic, to Prophet Muhammad, over a period of twenty-three years. It is composed in a style so unique, that it cannot be deemed either poetry or prose, but somehow a mixture of both. The Quran is inimitable; it cannot be simulated or copied, and God Almighty challenges mankind to pursue such an endeavor if he thinks he can:

“Or do they say he forged it? Say: Bring then a chapter like unto it, and call (to your aid) anyone you can, beside God, if it be you speak the truth.” (Quran 10:38)

The Quran’s language is indeed sublime, its recitation moving, as one non-Muslim scholar noted, “it was like the cadence of my heartbeat”. Due to its unique style of language, the Quran is not only highly readable, but also relatively easy to remember. This latter aspect has played an important role not only in the Quran’s preservation, but in the spiritual life of Muslims as well. God Himself declares,

“And We have indeed made the Quran easy to understand and remember; then is there anyone that will receive admonition?” (Quran 54:17)

One of the most important characteristics of the Quran is that it remains today, the only holy book which has never changed; it has remained free from any and all adulterations. Sir William Muir noted, “There is probably in the world no other book which has remained (fourteen) centuries with so pure a text.” The Quran was written down during the lifetime and under the supervision of the Prophet, who himself was unlettered. Thus its authenticity is unblemished, and its preservation is seen as the fulfillment of God’s promise:

“We have, without doubt, sent down the Message, and We will assuredly guard it from corruption.” (Quran 15:9)

The Quran is a book which provides the human being the spiritual and intellectual nourishment he/she craves. Its major themes include the oneness of God, the purpose of human existence, faith and God-consciousness, the Hereafter and its significance. The Quran also lays a heavy emphasis upon reason and understanding. In these spheres of human understanding, the Quran goes beyond just satisfying the human intellect; it causes one to reflect. Unlike other scriptures, there are Quranic challenges and prophecies. It is as well full of facts that have only recently been discovered; One of the most exciting fields in recent years has been the discovery of significant amount of scientific information in the Quran, including the event of the Big Bang, embryological data, and other information concerning astronomy biology, etc., there is not a single statement that has not been borne out by modern discoveries. In short, the Quran fulfils the heart, the soul, and the mind. Perhaps the best description of the Quran was given by Ali, the cousin of Prophet Muhammad when he expounded upon it as,

“The Book of God. In it is the record of what was before you, the judgment of what is among you, and the prophecies of what will come after you. It is decisive, not a case for levity. Whoever is a tyrant and ignores the Quran will be destroyed by God. Whoever seeks guidance from other than it will be misguided. The Quran is the unbreakable bond of connection with God; it is the remembrance full of wisdom and the straight path. The Quran does not become distorted by tongues; nor can it be deviated by caprices. It never dulls from repeated study; scholars will always want more of it. The wonders of the Quran are never ending. Whoever speaks from it will speak the truth, whoever rules with it will be just, and whoever holds fast to it will be guided to the straight path.” (Al-Tirmidhi)

(part 2 of 2)

Sunnah

The term Sunnah comes from the root word *sanna*, which means to pave the way or make a path easily passable, such that it becomes a commonly followed way by everyone afterwards. Thus Sunnah can be used to describe a street or road or path on which people, animals, and cars travel. Additionally, it can apply to a prophetic way, i.e. the law that they brought and taught as an explanation or further clarification of a divinely revealed book. Normally, the prophetic way includes references to his sayings, actions, physical features and character traits.

From the Islaamic standpoint, Sunnah refers to anything narrated or related about the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, authentically traced to him regarding his speech, actions, traits, and silent approvals.

Each narration is composed of two parts: the *isnad* and the *matn*. The *isnad* refers to a chain of people who narrated a particular narration. The *matn* is the actual text of the narration. The *isnad* must comprise upright and sincere individuals whose integrity is unquestionable.

The Speech of Prophet Muhammad

The speech of Prophet Muhammad refers to his sayings. For example, he said:

“Actions are judged by their intentions; everyone will be rewarded according to his/her intention. So whoever migrates for the sake of God and His Prophet then his migration will be noted as a migration for the sake of God and His Prophet. Conversely, one who migrates only to obtain something worldly or to marry a woman, then his migration will be worth what he had intended.” (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

The Prophet also said:

“Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, should say something good or keep quiet.”

The above two accounts clearly show that the Prophet spoke these words. Consequently, these are known as his speech.

The Actions of Prophet Muhammad

His actions pertain to anything he did, as authentically reported by the *Sahabah* (Companions). For instance, Hudhayfah reported that whenever the Prophet got up at night, he would clean his teeth with a tooth-stick. Also Aishah reported that the Prophet loved to do everything starting with the right side - putting on shoes, walking, cleaning himself, and in all his affairs generally.

The Silent Approvals of Prophet Muhammad

His silent approvals on different issues meant his not opposing or minding what he saw, heard or knew of the actions or sayings of his Companions. On one occasion, for example, the Prophet learned of actions of some of his Companions from other Companions. Soon after the battle of Khandaq, Prophet Muhammad gave the order to the Companions to move quickly to the tribe of Banu Quraydah, encouraging them to hurry so that perhaps they would pray *Asr* (the late afternoon prayer) there. Some of the Companions of the Prophet responded immediately and left without praying *Asr*. They arrived after sunset, pitched camp and prayed *Asr*- after sunset. At the same time, another group of Companions formulated their judgment differently. They thought that the Prophet was merely encouraging them to hasten to their destination, rather than to delay *Asr* until after sunset. Consequently, they decided to stay in Madinah until they had prayed *Asr*. Immediately thereafter, they hastened towards the tribe of Banu Quraydhah. When the Prophet was told of how each group responded differently to his announcement, he affirmed both judgments.

Physical and Moral Traits of Prophet Muhammad

Everything authentically narrated concerning the Prophet's complexion and the rest of his physical features is also included in the definition of Sunnah. Umm Ma'bad described what she saw of the great Prophet. She said:

“I saw a man, his face radiant with a bright glow, not too thin or too fat, elegant and handsome. His eyes had a deep black hue with long eyelashes. His voice was pleasant and his neck long. He had a thick beard. His long black eyebrows were beautifully arched and connected to each other. In silence, he remained dignified, commanding utmost awe and respect. When he spoke, his speech was brilliant. Of all people he was the most handsome and the most pleasant, even when approaching from a distance. In person, he was unique and most admirable. Graced with eloquent logic, his speech was moderate. His logical arguments were well organized as though they were a string of gems. He was not too tall or too short, but exactly in between. Among three, he appeared the most radiant and most vibrant. He had companions who affectionately honored him. When he spoke, they listened to him attentively. When he gave orders, they were quick to execute them. They rallied around him guarding him. He never frowned or spoke frivolously.” (Hakim)

Along with his physical features, his Companions also described his habits and behavior with people. Once Anas reported:

“I served the Prophet of Allah, upon him be peace, for ten years. During that time, he never once said to me as much as ‘Oof’ if I did something wrong. He never asked me, if I had failed to do something, ‘Why did you not do it?’

and he never said to me, if I had done something wrong, ‘Why did you do it?’”

From the above we can clearly see that when the term Sunnah appears in a general context referring to Prophet Muhammad it comprises anything narrated about the Prophet and authentically traced to him. Once a Muslim learns of the authenticity of any narration, he/she is obliged to follow and obey it accordingly. Such obedience is mandated by God as He declares:

“...and obey God and His Prophet and do not turn away when you hear (him speak).” (Quran 8:20)

At times, some Muslims are perplexed when people say that Sunnah is something only recommended and is not mandatory. Thus they conclude that we are only required to follow the Qur’an and not the Sunnah. Such an argument results from a gross misunderstanding. Scholars of Islaamic jurisprudence use the term Sunnah to denote what is authentically established of Prophet Muhammad in deeds which were not subsequently made mandatory by God.

They further hold that this includes any saying of Prophet Muhammad where he encourages Muslims to do a particular task and compliments those who uphold such attributes. Thus to them, the term Sunnah refers to what is “recommended” and is not mandatory (*fard* or *wajib*).

From the above, we can clearly see that the term Sunnah takes on different meanings when used by different Islaamic disciplines.